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Viewing cable 09BEIJING2063, PRC LEADERSHIP STABLE DESPITE TENSIONS; XI STILL

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09BEIJING2063	2009-07-20 10:43	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beijing

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.aftenposten.no/spesial/wikileaksdokumenter/article3994434.ece>

VZCZCXRO1479
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 002063

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/20/3034
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: PRC LEADERSHIP STABLE DESPITE TENSIONS; XI STILL
ON TOP

REF: A. BEIJING 2040
B. SHENYANG 127

Classified By: Acting Political Minister Counselor Benjamin Moeling. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶11. (C) Embassy contacts have reported that relations among China's top leaders remained largely stable, and the arrangements put in train for succession at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 appeared to be holding, with Xi Jinping likely to become Party chief and Li Keqiang to become Premier. Three years out, however, this succession scenario was by no means guaranteed, contacts contended, as a number of factors could cause Xi to stumble. End Summary.

Tense, but Stable, Succession in Place...

¶12. (C) Echoing views we have heard from a number of contacts over the past several months XXXXXXXXXXXX, told PolOff on May 13 that the Party leadership, in general, was "stable." Chen said it was too early to be certain about the outcome of the 18th Party Congress in 2012, but that he considered Xi Jinping to still be the front runner and Li Keqiang the runner-up. On May 26, XXXXXXXXXXXX senior editor at the Central Committee paper Guangming Ribao, separately agreed that the final succession outcome was too early to call but that the situation at the top was stable. All the leaders know that they had to hang together, Dong said, or they would hang separately. That was the lesson of the 1989 Tiananmen unrest and the fall of the former Soviet Union, according to Dong.

¶13. XXXXXXXXXXXX who served on the Central Committee General Office research staff when Premier Wen Jiabao was General Office Director in the late 1980s, stated in a meeting with PolOffs on May 18 that despite natural tensions and differences of view, the leadership was "very stable" and will remain so through 2012. In his view, Deng's final legacy to the Party was a system designed to avoid the vicious infighting of the past. The leadership lineup put in place at the 17th Congress was not likely to change, with Xi Jinping most likely becoming Party General Secretary and Li Keqiang taking the Premier slot.

Hu to Retain CMC Chair?

¶14. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX separately predicted that, as things now stand, Hu Jintao would probably stay on as Central Military Commission Chair at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, following the example of former Party chief Jiang Zemin in ¶12002. Chen dismissed the possibility of Hu trying to retain his positions of General Secretary and President, even though there was no formal rule mandating that he step down. There was strong consensus in the Party against China's top leader serving beyond two five-year "terms." Chen claimed that Li Changchun, He Guoqiang, and Zhou Yongkang, widely perceived as belonging to the Jiang Zemin-Zeng Qinghong political network, had all "sided with" and "supported" Hu Jintao and, in return, hoped this would pay dividends for their political allies in 2012. As a result, Chen asserted, Hu Jintao was now "very strong," even though he still must rule primarily through consensus as the "first among equals" among the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC).

... But Succession Sweepstakes Not Set in Stone

¶15. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX said, it was still "very early," and Xi could "stumble," potentially resulting in changes to the lineup in 2012. For example, if Hu's strength continued to grow, Hu might yet try to elevate Li Keqiang into the top job, Chen calculated. Chen said that the upcoming provincial personnel reshuffles would provide one clue to the leadership plans for 2012 as well as a barometer to measure Hu's strength.

¶16. XXXXXXXXXXXX formerly international page columnist of China Youth Daily, told PolOff on March 11 that one should not assume that Xi's promotion to Party chief was inevitable. Xi's role as PRC Vice President was "useless," Wang said, and there had only been one succession in Party

history that went according to plan, the transfer of power from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in 2002. Wang said that rumors continued to circulate that people were trying to undermine

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Xi as heir apparent. Wang claimed that Xi's extended diplomatic visits to Mexico and five Latin American and Caribbean nations, February 8-23, were unusual for a Vice President and speculated that Xi may have been sent hoping he would perform poorly and show that he was not cut out to be China's top leader. Xi's "inappropriate" comments in Mexico, Wang huffed, were unbecoming a Vice President and showed that Xi was not very well cultivated (ge ren xiu yang bu hao). (Note: In Mexico, Xi lashed out at "idle foreigners with nothing better to do" than criticize China.) The CYL group still hoped Li Keqiang could take over from Hu, Wang stated. (See Ref B for rumors of possible maneuvering between Xi and Li in China's northeast.)

Wen-Hu Tensions Downplayed

¶7. (C) Chen dismissed reports in Western media of tension between Wen and Hu. In particular, he discounted interpretations of Wen's absence at the May 12 memorial ceremony commemorating last year's Wenchuan earthquake as evidence of such tension. Chen stated that it would be unusual for both Hu and Wen to appear together at such an event, noting that there was only one other Politburo Standing Committee member present, seventh-ranking Li Keqiang XXXXXXXXXXXX was not a sign of tension with Hu. Wu attributed the absence of Wen photographs in the commemorative displays, which many observers claimed was a sign of tension because of Wen's high profile presence in Wenchuan at the time of the earthquake, to political maneuvering by Sichuan Party Secretary Liu Qibao. Liu, a CYL-faction official in Hu's camp, was simply trying to curry favor with Hu, according to Wu. Wu maintained that despite natural differences of views between Hu and Wen, the two had a very close working relationship which would continue until the next leadership turnover in ¶2012. (See Ref A for persistent criticism of Wen Jiabao).

Jiang and Zeng Retain Influence

¶8. (C) Wu Jiaxiang said that former Party chief Jiang Zemin remained powerful but that his influence was waning over time. Chen Jieren similarly told PolOff last fall that Jiang could not be dismissed as a factor in leadership politics but that his age and ill health were starting to erode his authority. Chen dismissed rumors circulating last year that Hu Jintao was attempting to undermine Jiang, stating that it "made no sense" for Hu to risk provoking a conflict when Jiang's influence was already decreasing.

¶9. (C) Chen claimed that former PBSC member, and close Jiang ally, Zeng Qinghong also retained considerable influence and that Jiang exercised influence through Zeng. Wu, who knows Zeng Qinghong personally, said that Zeng was still powerful and exercised his influence through Xi Jinping. Zeng was one of Xi's strong supporters in the General Secretary sweepstakes at the 17th Party Congress, according to Wu. Wu added that it was not strange that Zeng had withdrawn from public view since he retired. In addition to current Party norms which favored retired leaders staying out of public view, Zeng shunned the limelight of his own accord. In addition, Zeng had been suffering from minor health problems lately.

Biographical Note on Zeng Qinghong

¶10. (C) Zeng was one of the most open-minded of all contemporary Chinese leaders and was a strong supporter of political reform, according to Wu Jiaxiang. In Wu's view,

had Zeng become Party General Secretary, he would have led China toward democracy. While Zeng was a strong supporter of former Party paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, Zeng's mindset was closer to that of former Party chiefs Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang and former Politburo members Wan Li and Xi Zhongxun, Wu claimed. In addition, Wu said that Zeng had "a big heart" and was somewhat of an unsung hero within the Party who had quietly come to the aid of many comrades in trouble. Wu related a personal experience with Zeng following the military crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989 when Wu, having attempted suicide, was "covered with blood," and Zeng used his influence to ensure that Wu was promptly sent to a hospital and treated for his wounds. Zeng "saved my life," Wu related, adding that Zeng had similarly "saved" many other people

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